

The New Age of Russia  
Occult and Esoteric Dimensions

Impressum

THE NEW AGE OF RUSSIA  
OCCULT AND ESOTERIC DIMENSIONS

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## GUESTS FROM OUTER SPACE. OCCULT ASPECTS OF SOVIET SCIENCE FICTION

MATTHIAS SCHWARTZ

Many things in our science and techniques are secret, a whole lot of forbidden themes exist (...). Does this mean that we don't have to show people things which are at the limit of secrecy? No, in each question, even in the most complicated one, we can find the right way that the reader can feel how a task is solved, we can avoid vulgarization, can show how an idea is born. An idea never can be secret, even if the result of an idea is kept secret. (Boris Liapunov, 1951)<sup>1</sup>

### Introduction

Although the topic of my article has long been neglected in the field of cultural studies, science fiction (SF), or, as it is called in Russian: scientific fantasy (*nauchnaia fantastika*) is of fundamental significance for the establishment of occult thought in Soviet and post-Soviet Russia: It is precisely this genre that offered one of the few areas in the Stalin period and afterwards in which it was possible to articulate occult thoughts and practices that differed from official party ideology.<sup>2</sup> This astonishing phenomenon was facilitated by two circum-

stances. On the one hand, after the First Soviet Writers' Congress in 1934, SF was subordinated to the realm of children's and popular scientific literature, a fact which meant less ideological pressure than in the field of "serious" literature for grown-ups. On the other hand, its focus on the "fantastic" possibilities of scientific progress predestined the genre to speculative border crossings that were open for para-scientific and occult thoughts and world models.

One of the most prominent, if not the most central, "medium" for occult belief systems in the Stalin period was the fictional engagement with extraterrestrial life forms and energies, which had been discussed under the label of "Guests from outer space" since the beginning of the 1950s. In the so-called Thaw period under the rule of Nikita Khrushchev, the engagement with close encounters with outer space due to the first sputniks and Gagarin's space flight developed into the central theme of Soviet SF. But other factors also influenced SF, for instance, the popular engagement with native cultures from the recently decolonized Third World. Thus, SF constituted an extremely popular genre that, until the end of the Soviet Union as a strictly materialistic and atheistic state, offered occult belief systems and thoughts in a fantastic estranged form.<sup>3</sup> These stories functioned in a way, as the popular critic and science popularizer, Boris Liapunov, quoted above put it in 1951 in an internal discussion regarding science policy: Even if occult thoughts were forbidden in general, SF authors always found "the right way that the reader can feel how a task is solved".

### Communist Pinkertons: The anti-occult orientation of scientific adventure literature in the 1920s

Early Soviet mainstream SF, full of suspense, action and entertainment, was far removed from occult belief systems.<sup>4</sup> On the contrary, all sorts of religious or para-scientific models were ridiculed and vulgarized. This tendency had a long

1 Boris Liapunov at a discussion about SF in the Writers Union in April 1951, see Russian Archive of Literature and Art (Moscow, abbr. RGALI), f. 631, op. 22, ed. 41, l. 41; The article is for the most part based on the research results of my dissertation, see Matthias Schwartz, *Expeditionen in andere Welten. Sowjetische Abenteuerliteratur und Wissenschaftliche Fantastik* (Berlin, 2010); I thank Diana Aurisch for polishing my English.

2 The term "occult" I use in the sense the editors have defined it, cf. introduction to this volume; For a general survey of Soviet science fiction, see Darko Suvin, "Significant Themes in the Criticism of Soviet Science Fiction to 1965, with A Selected Bibliography," *Extrapolation* 11:2 (1970), 44–52; idem, "The Utopian Tradition of Russian Science Fiction," *The Modern Language Review* 66:1 (1971), 139–159; Boris Liapunov, *V mire fantastiki. Obzor nauchno-fantasticheskoi i fantasticheskoi literatury* (Moscow, 1975); John Glad, *Extrapolations From Dystopia. A Critical Study of Soviet Science Fiction* (Princeton NJ, 1982); Leonid Heller, *Vselennaia za predelom dogmy. Razmyshleniia o sovetskoi fantastike*, (London, 1985); Patrick L McGuire, *Red Stars. Political Aspects of Soviet Science Fiction* (Ann Arbor, 1985); Rafail Nudel'man, "Soviet Science Fiction and the Ideology of Soviet Society," *Science-Fiction Studies*

16 (1989), 38–66; Richard Stites, "World Outlook and Inner Fears in Soviet Science Fiction," *Science and the Soviet Social Order*, ed. Loren R. Graham (Cambridge, Mass., London, 1990), 299–324; Vsevolod Revich, *Perekrestok utopii. Sud'by fantastiki na fone sudeb strany* (Moscow, 1998).

3 On the problematic implications of such an "allegoric" reading, cf. Elana Gorn, "The Poetics of Censorship. Allegory as Form and Ideology in the Novels of Arkady and Boris Strugatsky," *Science Fiction Studies* 22 (1995), 87–105.

4 "Elite," *fin de siècle* literary adoptions of scientific innovations and topics, however, often dealt with spiritual, magic and religious implications and readings of technological progress, see Anindita Banerjee, *Genesis and Evolution of Science Fiction in Fin de Siecle Russia, 1880–1921* (Diss., Los Angeles, 2000).

tradition, beginning with the appearance of popular commercial adventure literature in the last third of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in Russia. These stories significantly shaped the images held by the Russian literate urban masses about the dangers and challenges of the modern world.<sup>5</sup> In doing so, they were aiming not so much to intimidate and overwhelm the reader but rather—as Jeffrey Brooks has shown—to make their readers familiar with the challenges of the new times.<sup>6</sup> This literature reached its zenith in the years after the defeated revolution of 1905, and it entered cultural history under the term “Pinkerton” literature due to the widely received polemic of the prominent literary critic Kornei Chukovskii, who railed against it as trashy, lowbrow literature.<sup>7</sup>

After the caesura of war, revolution and civil war, this adventure literature enjoyed a second heyday in the 1920s during the time of the New Economic Policy, during which magazines, booklets, book series and publishing houses specializing in the genre made it into the most popular reading material of the early Soviet period.<sup>8</sup> Nikolai Bukharin’s challenge, first voiced in 1922, to create a “communist Pinkerton”, was groundbreaking for the new ideological direction.<sup>9</sup> The worldwide export of revolutions but also global world wars or

5 According to today’s understanding, this included both historical stories of knights, romantic Gothic novels, crime novels, colonial jungle and sea adventures as well as „extraordinary travels“ related to technology and science. See Jeffrey Brooks, *When Russia Learned to Read. Literacy and Popular Literature, 1861–1917*, (Princeton, NJ, 1988); Stephen Lovell, “Literature and Entertainment in Russia. A Brief History,” *Reading for Entertainment in Contemporary Russia. Post-Soviet Popular Literature in Historical Perspective*, eds. Stephen Lovell and Birgit Menzel (Munich, 2005), 11–28; On modern commercial adventure novels in general, see Richard Phillips, *Mapping Men and Empire. A Geography of Adventure* (London, New York, 1997).

6 Brooks, *When Russia Learned to Read*, 246–268.

7 Kornei Chukovskii, “Nat Pinkerton i sovremennaia literatura” (1910), *Sobranie sochinenii v 15 tomakh. Literaturnaia kritika 1908–1915*, vol. 7 (Moskva, 2003), 25–62.

8 Nikolai Rybnikov, ed., *Massovyi chitatel’ i kniga* (Moskva, 1925); Evgenii Dobrenko, *Formovka sovetskogo chitatelia. Sotsial’nye i esteticheskie predposylki retsepcii sovetskoi literatury* (St. Petersburg, 1997); Mariia Cherniak, *Fenomen massovoi literatury XX veka* (St. Petersburg, 2005), 76–128.

9 See Nikolai Bukharin, “Kommunisticheskoe vospitanie molodezhi v usloviakh NĖPa (5-j Vser. s’ezd R.K.S.M. Doklad t. Bukharina. Utrennee zasedanie 13-go oktiabria),” *Pravda* 232 (14.10.1922), 2; All scholars until now dated Bukharin’s speech one year later, following Mariĕtta Shaginian’s notion, that she read about Bukharin’s claim for a “red Pinkerton” the first time in autumn 1923, see Mariĕtta Shaginian, “Kak ia pisala ‘Mess-Mend’ (1926),” *Sobranie sochinenii 1905–1933*, vol. 3 (Moscow, 1935), 375–382; Robert Russell, “Red Pinkertonism. An Aspect of Soviet Literature of the 1920s”, *Slavonic and East European Review* 3:60 (1982), 406–418; Carol Avins, *Border Crossings. The West and Russian Identity in Soviet Literature 1917–1934* (Berkeley, 1983), 55.

out of control laboratory experiments provided material for the stories. A huge number of stories also focused on the intellectual fashions of the creative and scientific avant-garde in Moscow and Petrograd.<sup>10</sup> These had taken up the cause of carrying out the political revolution in the arts and sciences, which threw off the ballast of an anachronistic bourgeois concept of science and culture in support of a revolution of knowledge.<sup>11</sup> Their “revolutionary dreams”<sup>12</sup> rejected all established norms and principles, yet also anticipated diverse “occult” and parascientific concepts of the intelligentsia, associated with names such as Aleksei Gastev and Aleksandr Bogdanov, Vladimir Bekhterev and Bernard Kazhinskii, Nikolai Fedorov and Konstantin Tsiolkovskii.<sup>13</sup>

The “communist Pinkertons” took their ideas as material in order to parody and denounce the possible consequences in dramatic subjects. Thus the fantastical adventure literature of the 1920s served not so much as a popularizer of these occult ideas, but rather as a playful and often satirical adaptation and tabloidization of these intellectual hypertrophies. The most well-known of these authors is Mariĕtta Shaginian, who (under the pseudonym of Jim Dollar), in the first part of her Mess-Mend trilogy *Mess Mend or the Unusual Adventure of the Yankees in Petrograd*, parodies, among others, biological and psychological concepts surrounding degeneration and mass suggestion, but also the Gastevist concept of labor.<sup>14</sup> But Shaginian, as an author coming from the

10 Schwartz, *Expeditionen in andere Welten*, 172–221.

11 John E. Bowlt, Olga Matich, eds., *Laboratory of Dreams. The Russian Avant-Garde and Cultural Experiment* (Stanford, 1990); Daniel Beer, “Blueprints for Change. The Human Sciences and the Coercive Transformation of Deviants in Russia, 1890–1930,” *Osiris* 22 (2007), 26–47; Yvonne Howell, “Eugenics, Rejuvenation, and Bulgakov’s Journey into the Heart of Dogness,” *Slavic Review* 65 (2006), 544–562.

12 See Richard Stites, *Revolutionary Dreams. Utopian Vision and Experimental Life in the Russian Revolution* (New York, Oxford, 1989).

13 See Michael Hagemester’s chapter in this volume; idem “‘Unser Körper muss unser Werk sein.’ Beherrschung der Natur und Überwindung des Todes in russischen Projekten des frühen 20. Jahrhunderts,” In: Boris Groys and Michael Hagemester, eds., *Die Neue Menschheit. Biopolitische Utopien in Russland zu Beginn des 20. Jahrhunderts* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 2005), 19–67; Matthias Schwartz, Wladimir Velminski, Torben Philipp, eds., *Laien, Lektüren, Laboratorien. Künste und Wissenschaften in Russland 1860–1960* (Frankfurt a.M., 2008).

14 Mariĕtta Shaginian [Dzhim Dollar], „Mess-Mend. Roman-trilogia. Chast’ I. Ianki v Petrograde,” *Sobranie sochinenii 1905–1933*, vol. 3 (Moscow 1935), 105–374. On the novel cf. Anthony Vanchu, “Technology as Esoteric Cosmology in Early Soviet Literature,” In: Bernice G. Rosenthal, ed., *The Occult in Russian and Soviet Culture* (Ithaca, London: Cornell University Press, 1997), 203–222, here 212–221; Muireann Maguire, *Soviet Gothic-Fantastic. A Study of Gothic and Supernatural Themes in Early Soviet Literature* (Diss., Cambridge, 2008), 61–65. However, the intention of this novel has been slightly misread by nearly all western scholars

“serious” high culture, was rather an exception; the market was dominated by authors such as Mikhail Gireli, Viktor Goncharov or Vladimir Orlovskii, all mostly forgotten nowadays. The powerhungry villains of their stories, set in contemporary Russia or in capitalist foreign countries, are able, with the help of Indian yoga techniques, to read the thoughts of other people and to telepathically manipulate them, siphon the “psychic energy” of people with the help of special “psycho-machines”, or use solar energy, accumulated in gigantic pyramid-like structures called “horror machines”, to unleash mass epidemics among the panicking masses.<sup>15</sup>

Michail Girelis’ (pseud. of Michail Osipovič Pergament) novel *The Crime of Professor Zvezdochetov* (*Prestuplenie professora Zvezdochetova*, 1926), for instance, is set in a location typical of the genre, a private provincial medical laboratory, in which the parody of “cosmistic” conceptions of the psyche are taken to a literally absurd extreme.<sup>16</sup> With the help of Indian yoga practices as well as optical and chemo-physical apparatuses, the “astrology” professor (in Russian *zvezdochet* means “astrologer”) here attempts to investigate the “cosmic energy” of the human origin. In order to do so, he first psychically infiltrates the soul of his assistant, and then of his wife, which provides him with a strongly erotically coded delight, but does not lead to secret knowledge or enlightenment of any kind. Rather, both women die due to his experiments, and for this reason the professor lands in front of the procurator at the end of the story, accused of a double murder.<sup>17</sup>

This “tabloidesque” attitude of popular adventure literature towards occult and scientific practices and models to explain the world did not change noticeably until 1928, when this literature became the focus of massive criticism a result of the “Great Upheaval”. It was strongly attacked as unworldly entertainment literature and counter-revolutionary contraband. In the polemic

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insofar as they worked with the completely reworked version of 1956, where Shaginian not only changed the names and some plotlines to a more “Socialist realist” style, but also the overall concept of the novel, which now is mainly directed against the manipulative capitalist and imperialist system. On this last aspect, see Avins, *Border crossings*, 55–60.

15 See Viktor Goncharov, *Psikho-mashina. Fantasticheskii roman* (Moscow 1924); Vladimir Orlovskii, *Mashina uzhasa. Nauchno-fantasticheskaia povest’* (1925) (Leningrad, 1927). For an interpretation of these novels see Schwartz, *Expeditionen in andere Welten*, 191–204.

16 Michail Gireli, *Prestuplenie professora Zvezdochetova* (Moscow, 1926).

17 Ibid. Gireli also pursued this idea of psycho-energetic mind-reading in his second novel *Eozoon. The Dawn of Life* (*Eozoon. Zaria zhizni*) (Leningrad, 1929); regarding the biography of Gireli see Igor’Chalimbadzha, “Gireli Michail Osipovich,” *Enciklopediia fantastiki. Kto est’ kto*, ed. Vladimir Gakov (Minsk, 1995), 167.

against the genre, the hitherto barely reflected and only occasionally used term “scientific-fantastical” became the focus of the debate. The defenders wanted to use this term to at least partially save this genre by portraying it as a literature of industrial development and scientific progress. But all these attempts to save the genre failed and the main magazines and publishing houses were closed down by 1932. At the First Soviet Writers’ Congress the term played only a marginal role.<sup>18</sup>

### Necrobiotic rays and wonder generators: The occult beginnings of Stalinist Science Fiction

On the eve of the First Soviet Writers’ Congress in 1934, when the new conceptualization of Soviet literature was being discussed, the reformulation of entertainment literature and popular science literature had a central role. Yet, at the beginning, all forms of adventure literature and SF had already been rejected. However, this approach found no support among authors, publishing houses and readers, so that already in the middle of the 1930s, “Scientific Fantasy” was allowed within the framework of children’s and youth literature.<sup>19</sup> The genre thereby found itself in an odd intermediate position. On the one hand, in terms of Socialist Realism it was to popularize future social and especially scientific developments in the spirit of the socialist construction sites, while on the other hand, it was also expected that it would anticipate future developments in terms of Maxim Gorky’s definition of myth and folklore. In his pioneering speech at the Writers’ Congress, Gorky had attested that, in their antique myths and folklore, the common people were using fantastical objects such as flying carpets or seven league boots to articulate technical wishes that would serve to improve their miserable existence.<sup>20</sup>

It is precisely these seemingly fantastic “adventures of invention”, as the influential critic and science popularizer Aleksandr Ivich wrote in a book that was published three times in the 1930s alone, that one should take as a model in order to anticipate qualitative jumps in scientific development, that seem impossible according to contemporary conceptions.<sup>21</sup> According to him, it is

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18 For a detailed reconstruction of this debate see Schwartz, *Expeditionen in andere Welten*, 235–251.

19 Ibid., 323–331.

20 Maksim Gor’kii, “Doklad A. M. Gor’kogo o sovetskoj literature,” *Pervyj vsesoiuznyi s’ezd sovetskikh pisatelei 1934. Stenograficheskii otchet* (Moscow, 1934), 5–18.

21 Aleksandr Ivich, *Priključeniiia izobretenii* (Izdanie vtoroe, pererabotannoe, Moscow, 1935).

seemingly the unchangeable laws of nature, that bourgeois science claims was God-given, which must be called into question. Precisely such a scepticism towards established knowledge was a gateway for occult explanations that claimed the existence of secret powers that humans could wrest from nature.<sup>22</sup>

In the 1930s such “scientific fantastic” fictional “adventures of invention” in Russia focused especially on the field of physics.<sup>23</sup> Thus in 1939 and 1940, Iurii Dolgushin, who would later go on to become a decisive proponent of Lysenkoism, published his first “scientific fantasy novel” *Generator of Wonders* (*Generator chudes*) in installments in the popular science journal *Tekhnika – molodezhi*.<sup>24</sup> In the novel, biology and physics find themselves at the center of attention as models for explaining the human brain and life. They are represented by two scientists, the young radio engineer Nikolai Tungusov, who conducts physical experiments with electromagnetic waves in his private laboratory, and the renowned physiologist and surgeon Professor Ridan, who investigates electromagnetic manipulations of the brain in his private villa in Moscow.

During a coincidental encounter the two scientists discover that their research areas complement each other. Thus they begin to build the so-called Generator of Wonders. During this work they are described as typical “mad scientists” of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, who retreat from social life and secretly devote themselves to their private obsessions.<sup>25</sup> Thus Tungusov, who lives alone at home without parents, a wife or children, only with an aunt, is

22 Ibid. Thus revolutionary successes in the field of the sciences, such as the one declared by Lysenko in regard to creative Darwinism in the field of biology in the post-war period, were often simulated as fictional intellectual games within Scientific Fantasy as early as the 1930s. For the Soviet post-war period see Igor J. Polianski, “Das Unbehagen der Natur. Sowjetische Populärwissenschaft als semiotische Lektüre,” *Laien, Lektüren, Laboratorien*, 71–113.

23 Petr Kapitsa, “O nauchnoi fantastike,” *Detskaia literatura* 4 (1940), 18–23.

24 Preprints appeared already in 1938, in 1941 Dolgushin additionally wrote a radio version of the novel. See Iurii Dolgushin, “Generator chudes. Nauchno-fantasticheskii roman,” *Tekhnika – molodezhi* 1 (1939), 34–40; 2, 40–47; 3, 53–59; 5, 45–51; 6, 49–54; 7–8, 58–65; 9, 33–38; 10–11, 59–67; 1 (1940), 36–42; 2–3, 61–66; 4, 46–52; 5, 50–57; 7, 50–56; 10, 50–58; 11, 43–50; 12, 2 cover, 51–58; idem: *Generator chudes (Radiokompozitsiia v dvukh chastiakh dlia detei starshego shkol'nogo vozrasta)* (Moscow, 1941). On Dolgushin's biography see Genadii Prashkevich, *Krasnyi sfinks. Istoriia russkoi fantastiki ot V. F. Odoevskogo do Boris Shterna* (Novosibirsk, 2007), 353–361.

25 For this topic see Barbara Benedict, “The Mad Scientist. The Creation of a Literary Stereotype,” *Imagining the Sciences. Expression of New Knowledge in the “Long” Eighteenth Century*, eds. Robert C. Leitz, Kevin L. Cope (New York, 2004), 59–107.

not at all interested in the labor in the factory, while he pursues the “sacred acts” of his research at home at night.<sup>26</sup>

Professor Ridan, who lives alone in a large villa with his daughter, is the same sort of strange loner. The two scholars, protected by the NKVD, threatened by German spies and curious rivals, abandon themselves with total passion to their “sacred acts”:

The professor disappears into a dark corridor. Tungusov's workroom greets him with a large circle of light concentrated on the “Generator of Wonders” by the Viking scale, which stands in the middle of the room [...] Ridan locks the door securely behind him. [...] It was already light when both emerged from the room, completely robbed of strength from the overabundance of experiences and from exhaustion.<sup>27</sup>

The reader is not told what kind of experiments the two of them carry out every night behind closed doors. The result is a “Generator of Wonders”, which, through special receiving and sending machines, can not only receive and manipulate telepathic signals of the human brain across great distances, but also, with the help of “life rays”, heals diseases and brings the dead back to life.<sup>28</sup> Thus, Dolgushin's novel actually does represent a cryptogram of real research that deals with electromagnetic brain waves and biophysical experiments on the revival of frozen creatures. After Bekhterev's death in 1927, research continued on the phenomenon of electromagnetic brain waves in various institutions in the Soviet Union.<sup>29</sup>

26 „All these works he judged as insignificant, and the word „invention“ only irritated him. The true matter started for him only at home, in the evening, when he felt himself completely free. Here started his sacred act.“ Dolgushin, “Generator chudes”, *Tekhnika – molodezhi* 6 (1939), 49.

27 Ibid., 5 (1940), 57.

28 Dolgushin: *Generator chudes*, *Tekhnika – molodezhi* 5 (1940), 55–57; 11 (1940), 49.

29 Regarding the description of research institutions, the novel mainly referred to Bekhterev's Leningrad Brain Institute, where Leonid Vasil'ev (1891–1966) continued his work on “mental suggestion” (telepathy) from 1932 to 1937. Without any official scientific exchange taking place, Sergei Turlygin simultaneously investigated the electromagnetic rays of the brain in the laboratory for biophysics of the Academy of Sciences of the USSR under the directorship of Petr Lazarev (1878–1942). See Leonid Vasil'ev, *Vnushenie na rasstoianie. Zametki fiziologa* (Moscow, 1962); Mikhail Agursky, “An Occult Source of Socialist Realism. Gorky and Theories of Thought Transference,” In: Rosenthal, ed., *The Occult*, 247–272, here 258. The topic also regularly appeared in the mainstream science journals, including the publications by Dolgushin himself. See Iurii Dolgushin, “Luchi professora Gurvicha,” *Znanie – sila* 10–11 (1939), 21–24.



In contrast to the “communist Pinkertons” of the 1920s, the fictional adoption of ideas on telepathy and resuscitation of the dead no longer treats them simply as a means of entertaining and captivating the readers, but provide them with the aura of mythical-sacred knowledge that reveals a deeper understanding of humans. Thus it is not the possibilities of the “life rays” that captivate Prof. Ridan’s “daydreams” (*mechty*),<sup>30</sup> but specific “necrobiotic rays”. These are sent out by the brains of the dying and transmit telepathic suggestive powers to the brains of relatives thousands of kilometers away: “The discovery of necrobiotic rays brings us closer to understanding one of the ‘most secret’ facts [...]. I mean the case of death, which can be ‘felt’ across a distance of thousands of kilometers and causes hallucinations in people who are close to the dying person.”<sup>31</sup> While one only consciously registers the “death signals” (*signaly smerti*) sent out by a person one is close to, as one is conditioned towards these as in a Pavlovian reflex, the signals sent out by people unknown to one can influence a person in the form of panic attacks, nervous breakdowns or simply an uncomfortable feeling, without the person being consciously aware of it.<sup>32</sup>

Thus the “most secret” facts about future scientific developments also represented a kind of knowledge, hidden, censored and forbidden in many ways, about the Soviet present during the “Great Terror” of the late 30s. The “necrobiotic rays” of deceased friends and relatives, which cause panic attacks, nervous breakdowns and feelings of discomfort, clearly point to the time in which the novel was created. Similarly, the topic of state surveillance and the manipulation of people via the media is not directly addressed, but Prof. Ridan’s experiments aiming for the complete control of all thoughts clearly point in this direction. Thus the “occult” knowledge of the scientific-fantastical stories of the Stalin period comes to have very ambivalent meaning. On the allegorical level, this knowledge points to the forbidden sides of Stalinist society and, in its visions of the future, simultaneously offers an imaginary way out of the threat of death and states of fear of the present through the healing of psychic wounds promised by the resurrection of relatives and friends who died prematurely. While this political subtext can be found in the works of other authors of this time, such as Aleksandr Beliaev or Grigorii Grebnev, two authors, Ivan Efremov and Aleksandr Kazantsev, developed a decidedly occult poetics in the 1940s.<sup>33</sup>

30 Ibid. 5 (1940), 50.

31 Ibid., 57.

32 Ibid.

33 Aleksandr Beliaev wrote several novels in this sense, like the 1933 novel *The Jump into the*

### From the Tunguska event to the atomic bomb: Alien encounters in the post-war period

While scientific fantasy had found a niche for occult thought models within the field of children’s literature during the pre-war period, as a result of the loosening of the censorship during the war, it was also discussed more often in the union-wide press such as the *Komsomol’skaia pravda* or the *Literaturnaia gazeta*. One reaction to this was that some branches of the Writers’ Union began receiving manuscripts in the so-called “self-flow” (*samotek*), which were then forwarded to the main office of the Writers’ Association in Moscow. One of these manuscripts was sent from the Kyrgyz branch of the Writers’ Association in 1946 with a request for review, as there was no expert on location who was familiar with scientific-fantastical literature.<sup>34</sup> The text was reviewed only after repeated requests from Kyrgyzstan, and was then given to association member Aleksandr Kazantsev in the fall of that year. However, he opposed accepting the fantastic novel *Problems of Peace* (*Problemy mira*) for publication.<sup>35</sup>

The novel *Problems of Peace* tells the story of a prehistorical civilization from 35,000 years ago whose members live underground as protection from wild animals and that provides a model for today’s society. However, according to Kazantsev’s review, the novel and the social order it describes, which combines socialist ideas with Christianity, the separation of the sexes, the euthanasia of sick children, the honoring of ancestors and a collective council of elders, presents an ideologically dangerous mixture, moreover, the work is of poor literary quality and full of clichés.<sup>36</sup>

The author of the novel, Trofim Luk’ianovič Antonov, an “old engineer” from Frunze, did not accept this rejection, which was very understandable within the context of Soviet literary policy, and wrote a long letter to the “Patron of the defense writers”, Marshall Kliment Voroshilov, asking for his

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*Void* (*Pryzhok v nichto*), dedicated to the Soviet rocket pioneer and student of Tsiolkovskii, Fridrikh Tsander (1887–1933), *The W Laboratory* (*Laboratoria Dubl’vè*, 1938) about psychoneurological mind-expanding experiments or *Ariel* (*Ariël*, 1941). Grebnev published in 1937 for the first time his fantastic novel *Arktaniia. The flying station* (*Arktaniia. Letaiushchaia stantsiia*) about a communist future, where the resurrection of the dead and undead fascists played a crucial role. Schwartz, *Expeditionen in andere Welten*, 346–352, 392–395.

34 See the correspondence and the critiques of Kazantsev of T.L. Anotonov’s novel *Problems of Freedom* 1946–1947, RGALI, f. 631, op. 22, ed. 11, l. 1–11.

35 Ibid., l. 2, 10–11.

36 Ibid., l. 10–11.



help.<sup>37</sup> According to Antonov, the novel's rehabilitation of Christ as a "Great Humanist" was highly topical, Christ's message having only later been falsified by the state church. Antonov argued that Christ had fought against the Roman oligarchy and had been the first to advocate a "realm of happiness on earth", to which "the Great Humanist I. V. Stalin was leading humanity with an iron hand" today.<sup>38</sup> He maintained that the "uneducated critics of the Writers' Association" had also failed to understand the political message:

[...] at a time in which the Christian topic, in the way in which it is portrayed in 'The Problems of Peace', is for us Communists a highly important, I would even say, a profitable one, because it strikes at the hypocrisy of our worst enemy, the Christian caste of priests, and provides us with an advantageous position in comparison, through us shattering the foundation of our enemy's camp.<sup>39</sup>

In fact, the Council of Ministers of the USSR, of which Voroshilov was the chairman, saw itself obliged to intervene with the Writers' Union on the author's behalf by requesting that the Association rethink the rejection of the manuscript and get in touch with the author in order to save the novel through reworking.<sup>40</sup>

The Writers' Union refused this request, but the events show how insecure the status of Scientific Fantasy was, as this manuscript was by no means an anomaly. Fantasy seems to have been associated by many readers with arcane, secret knowledge that could provide one with explanations about one's own society, explanations that went beyond the official announcements and with decidedly religious connotations.

The fact that this perception was not simply an incorrect reception of the Soviet provinces can nowhere be seen more clearly than in the reviewer of the Writers' Union, Aleksandr Kazantsev (1906–2002). After studying at the Tomsk Polytechnical Institute, Kazantsev had worked in various places as a mechanic and inventor before beginning to write SF in the middle of the 1930s.<sup>41</sup> He simultaneously remained active as a scientific organizer, thus in

37 Ibid., l. 3.

38 Ibid., l. 5.

39 Ibid., l. 6.

40 Ibid., l. 8–9.

41 However, the only information about his actual work in the military-industrial sector are the autobiographical pieces of information that he himself labelled as fiction, which are to be

1939 he worked as the chief engineer of the industrial sector of the Soviet Pavilion at the World's Fair in New York.<sup>42</sup> During the war he was also involved in the defense and industrial sector in leadership positions and climbed to the rank of colonel before officially devoting himself entirely to literary pursuits after the war. Within the Writers' Union he became the reviewer responsible for SF within the section for *scientific-fictional literature (nauchno-khudozhestvennaia literatura)*.<sup>43</sup> He played a central role within literary policy in various functions within and outside of the Union into the 1970s, whereby, as an advocate of the "Stalinist" definition of the genre, especially due to his good contacts all the way into the Politburo of the CPSU, he developed into one of the most prominent opponents of the well-known Soviet SF authors, the brothers Arkadii and Boris Strugatskii.<sup>44</sup>

His first work consisted of a screenplay, entitled *Arenida (Arenida)*, written together with the inventor and director of the Leningrad House of Scientists, Izraël' Shapiro, which won the first prize for the best SF screenplay at a nationwide contest organized by the Houses of Scientists in Leningrad and Moscow and the film studio *Mezhrabpomfilm* in February 1936.<sup>45</sup> *Arenida* is set in the year 1940 and tells the story of a gigantic meteorite named *Arenida* that is

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taken with a grain of salt. Aleksandr Kazantsev and Nikita Kazantsev, *Fantast. Mne-monicheskii roman v dvukh knigakh*, vol. 1 (Moscow, 2001), 264–269.

42 Britikov, *Russkii sovetskii nauchno-fantasticheskii roman*, 156.

43 The term "scientific-fictional" was shaped by Gorky in the beginning of the 1930s and became a controversial category in concurrence to the term "scientific-fantastic" prose until the early 1950s. For Kazantsev's biography, as well as for the pre-war period, one is dependent on his own statements, according to which he, obviously due to his knowledge of engineering and his political reliability, was engaged in special commissions during the war, which were to work behind the lines to secure secret defense and industrial projects of the Germans for the Soviet Union, and through which he, for example, was also involved with the German V-2 rocket. After the war, as Chairman he led the Commission for Dismantling of Industrial Facilities in occupied Austria before returning to his literary passions after the dissolution of the commission, Kazantsev: *Fantast* (vol. 1), 427–451.

44 Thus, he was essential to bringing about the ban of some works by Arkadii und Boris Strugatskii. Erik Simon, "The Strugatskys in Political Context", *Science Fiction Studies* 31 (2004), 378–406, here 394–397.

45 Kazantsev und Shapiro received the second prize. The first prize was not awarded as, according to the opinion of the jury, no author had successfully combined the scientific idea with its filmic realization Iurii Fedorov, "Fantastika v nauke i kino," *Kino* 8 (11.02.1936), 2. On the background Aleksandr Kolpakov, "Vtoroe dykhanie (Fantasticheskaia sud'ba fantasticheskikh knig)," *V mire knig* 7 (1985), 54–56.

speeding towards earth and threatening to destroy it.<sup>46</sup> While panic breaks out among the people in the West and everyone is preparing for the end of the world, which leads to chaos, outbreaks of violence and escalating criminality, a tense work-oriented atmosphere reigns in the Soviet Union, for Soviet scientists have developed an energy accumulator that can release gigantic amounts of energy. Thanks to this invention, the Soviets build a titanic facility, for which all factories and firms of the country are forced to halt their work for 19 days in order to allow the facility to charge. Three days before the predicted collision of the meteorite, this gigantic amount of stored energy is fired towards the heavenly body with special canons and tears it into “hundreds of particles burning in yellow light”, so that the end of the world is avoided: “An unbelievably magnificent firework spread across the sky, as if someone had hit a magic hammer against the sun. Lightning, fiery gushers and fountains light up the heavens.”<sup>47</sup>

As this scenario did not simply serve for pure scientific propaganda but also enabled a clearly religious-apocalyptic reading, it encountered both heavy public and internal criticism. In a *Pravda* article written in early 1938, the first secretary of the Komsomol, Aleksandr Kosarev (1903–1939), turned against several “sectants” who had prophesied, based on the screenplay, an imminent “end of the world” by a “stone from heaven” (*nebesnyi kamen*).<sup>48</sup> When Kazantsev as sole author later expanded the screenplay into the scientific-fantastical novel *The Burning Island* (*Pylaiushchii ostrov*) in 1940/41, he was forced to make major changes in the plot. Now it is no longer a heavenly body falling to earth that causes panic and chaos in the West, but a magical weapon built by the capitalists themselves that is capable of causing a “nitrogen fire” in the atmosphere.<sup>49</sup> But even if the occult subtext in this novel, published in 1941, has been largely eliminated, Kazantsev continued to be fascinated by this topic, and when the censorship rules were loosened as a result of the Second

46 After the publication of an excerpt in the newspaper of the Soviet for National Economics, *Za industrializaciiu*, this screenplay was published in complete form for the first time in 1937 in the *Leningradskaia Pravda*. A. Kazantsev and Izrael' Shapiro, “Arenida (Otryvki iz stsenariia i libretto fil'ma),” *Za industrializatsiiu* 243 (18.10.1936), 4.

47 *Ibid.*, 4.

48 Kolpakov: “Vtoroe dykhanie,” 55.

49 The Name *Arenida* no longer refers to a meteorite, but to an island in the Arctic Sea, which is completely destroyed during the test of a new weapon by the imperialistic military forces. While the capitalists pursue only military goals against the Bolsheviks, thanks to collective efforts the Soviet Union is able to avoid the outbreak of war at the last minute. A. Kazantsev, *Pylaiushchii ostrov. Nauchno-fantasticheskii roman*, (Moscow, Leningrad, 1941).

World War, he once again took up his idea of an extraterrestrial heavenly body that influences human destiny. This time around it is not terrestrial ray-emitting weapons which successfully destroy the extraterrestrial invader, but it is “cosmic rays” that help humans to find a new understanding of themselves.

Not even half a year after the first atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima in August 1945, the popular science journal *Vokrug sveta* published Kazantsev's “hypothetical story” (*rasskaz-gipoteza*) *The Explosion* (*Vzryv*) as the cover story of then January 1946 issue.<sup>50</sup> The story deals with the so-called Tunguska meteorite, which had crashed in the central Siberian mountain region Tunguska in 1908. The meteorite became well-known in the 1920s due to the reports by the magazine *Vsemirnyi sledopyt* about the Soviet meteorite researcher Leonid Kulik (1883–1942), who had searched in vain for the site of the meteorite in the Taiga.<sup>51</sup>

Kazantsev took this hitherto never found meteorite as the point of departure for his hypothetical story, which additionally mystified the event as an exotic riddle and occult awakening event. Thus the story begins with a magazine editor's childhood memories of a boat trip along the river of the same name through the Siberian Taiga in the year 1908, which had always remained in his memory as a parareligious experience.<sup>52</sup> After this opening, the narrator receives a visit on 3 April 1945 from an ethnographer and a physicist who want to undertake an expedition into precisely that region in order to prove their different research hypotheses: The ethnographer wants to prove that the indigenous inhabitants of Siberia were descended from “African Negroes” while the physicist maintains that the meteorite exploded shortly before its impact in an atomic chain reaction. Only after the dropping of the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki does the narrator once again hear something about the completely “savage” researchers.<sup>53</sup> As it turns out, the Evenks living in the region of the alleged meteorite crash have all died of a strange disease. The lone

50 Aleksandr Kazantsev, “Vzryv. Rasskaz-gipoteza,” *Vokrug sveta* 1 (1946), 39–46. The *Literaturnaiia gazeta* deemed their first public reading to be worth an individual report. [Anon.]: “Novyi rasskaz A. Kazantseva (V Soiuzhe sovetskikh pisatelei SSSR),” *Literaturnaiia gazeta* 50 (08.12.1945), 4.

51 Leonid Kulik, *Za tunguskim divom. Vmesto fel'etona* (Krasnoiarsk 1927); [Anon.], “Sledopyt na pomoshch' L. A. Kuliku, *Vsemirnyi sledopyt* 10–12 (1928), 782, 868–871, 947. Kulik died in 1942 in a German POW camp, also cf. on this topic E. Krinov, “Tunguskoe divo,” *Znanie – sila* 8 (1951), 12–14; F. Zigel', “Nerazgadannaia TAINA”, *Ibid.* 6 (1959), 40.

52 Kazantsev, “Vzryv,” 39–41.

53 *Ibid.*, 43.

survivor is a completely dark-skinned female shaman clad only in a loincloth.<sup>54</sup> When the physicist asks her about the Soviet plans for space travel, she suddenly breaks down but wants to impart a final message to the researchers as she lies dying, but she takes her secret to the grave. The researchers merely hear her last heartbeats, whereby they notice that her heart is located not on the left but on the right side of her body.<sup>55</sup> Thus the ethnographer rejects his hypothesis that the indigenous Siberians came from Africa, while the physicist ends the story with the conclusion: “It is not impossible that the explosion did not occur in a uranium meteorite, but in an interplanetary spaceship powered by atomic energy.”<sup>56</sup>

Kazantsev connects this SF subject matter with an occult concept in the character of the shaman woman, who possesses wondrous healing powers and sings “prehistoric songs”. For the shaman with the strange anatomy not only has a secret connection to atomic rays and extraterrestrial existence, but the encounter with her is also a moment of spiritual awakening for the two researchers.<sup>57</sup> One of the researchers describes their first meeting—which takes place at the same time as the dropping of the atomic bombs by the Americans on Hiroshima and Nagasaki—as follows:

The morning star shines, surrounded by a small aureole, above the black descending line of the forest. The shaman and her companions stand in the middle of the moor with arms upraised. Then I heard a deep, long tone. As if in response the distant echo of the forest was heard, repeating the note several octaves higher. Then an echo, getting already louder, continued the strange, unclear melody. I understood that she was singing there—the shaman. Thus began a non-repeatable duet between a voice and a forest echo, whereby they were often heard together, mixing in an incomprehensible but magical harmony. The song ended. I did not want to and could not move.<sup>58</sup>

The “strange, unclear melody” literally puts a spell on the listener who no longer can nor wants to move, and places him in another, cosmic or—in the

54 Thus, she is described by various witnesses as an “incomprehensible”, “foreign” person in terms of physique and character. *Ibid.*, 40, 44.

55 *Ibid.*, 45–46.

56 *Ibid.*, 46. According to some apocryphal writings and folk tales, which were common in Eastern Europe as well, vampires as reincarnations of the antichrist are supposed to have their heart on the right side (Dextrocardia). Thanks to Paul Hillery for this reference.

57 *Ibid.*, 42–43.

58 *Ibid.*, 44.

terminology of Mircea Eliade—“sacred time”. At the same time, the scenery is clearly marked by Venus in the shape of the morning star, which in Christian symbolism represents both the light-filled appearance of Christ in the night of the world as well as Lucifer, the fallen angel. It is precisely this ambivalent interpretation that is delivered by Kazantsev’s story of the atomic bomb explosion of Hiroshima in the form of the exploding spaceship, an event which, on the one hand, augurs the epiphanic appearance of the salvation of mankind, and on the other hand can also be read as Satan’s plummeting to Hell, falling from the sky like lightning.<sup>59</sup>

It must be noted that Kazantsev was not the first in Stalin’s time who imagined a connection between atomic rays and cosmic energies that constitute a holy time of enlightened wisdom. This idea can be traced back to Ivan Efremov, who dealt with the topic of transcendental cosmic effects of atomic energy in his *Stories of the Unusual* (*Rasskazy o neobyknovennom*), written during the war. Efremov, son of a wood merchant, had worked as a dock worker, sailor and member of the Red Army before embarking on a successful career as a paleontologist in the 1930s.<sup>60</sup> In 1952, as a renowned professor he even received a Stalin Award for his paleontological work. He wrote his first stories during the war while evacuated to Middle Asia due to a long illness. These stories were soon published in the army magazines *The Red Army Soldier* (*Krasnoarmeets*) and *The Red Navy Sailor* (*Krasnoflotets*), in *Tekhnika – molodezhi* as well as in the main literary magazine *Novyi mir*, and by 1946 had already been published six times in book form.

Encounters with hitherto unknown “fantastic” secrets of nature that enable humans to experience spiritual cleansing and inner enlightenment play a central role in all of these stories. This concept of nature is mostly clearly portrayed in the story *The Observatory of Nur-i-Desht* (*Observatoriia Nur-i-Desht*, 1944), in which the internal narrator tells how he was sent as a wounded soldier to recover in Central Asia and by chance lands at an archaeological dig in

59 In addition, the story has a military political subtext as it implicitly points to the absolutely secret project to build an atomic bomb in Siberia.

60 For biographical details see Evgenii Brandis and Vladimir Dmitrevskii, *Cherez gory vremeni. Ocherk tvorchestva I. Efremova* (Moscow, 1963); [Evgenii Brandis], “Zhizn’ uchenogo i pisatelja. Interv’iu s I. A. Efremovym (Materialy k tvorcheskoi biografii I. A. Efremova)” [1960], *Voprosy literatury* 2 (1978), 187–208; Petr Chudinov, *Ivan Antonovich Efremov. 1907–1972* (Moscow, 1987); idem, “K portretu sovremennika,” *Ivan Antonovich Efremov. Perepiska s uchenymi. Neizdannye raboty*, ed. N. V. Boiko (Moscow, 1994), 5–28; Prashkevich, *Krasnyi sfinks*, 408–426; For the hitherto most insightful and penetrative analysis of Efremov’s prose see Heller, *Vselemaia za predelom dogmy*, 317–358.

the middle of the desert, where an old professor and his young Uzbek assistant are excavating an ancient observatory called “Light of the Desert” (which is the Uyghur meaning of “Nur-i-Desht”). Strange states of exhaustion, happy evenings with the assistant by the campfire or at the nearby river as well as an antique vase that shines at night lead the narrator to conclude that the observatory must be built of radioactive material the rays of which cause both healing and euphoric effects on people as well as an unusually clear view of the starry sky: “And suddenly it turned out that the cause of all this was the radium – and only...That is, if the radium had not existed, [...] the wonderful enchantment of those days in the ancient observatory would not have occurred...”<sup>61</sup> Thus the radioactive “Light of the Desert” not only heals the war wounds of the narrator but also brings to life the desert of his soul, so that in the end he can also “open” himself up towards Tania, the young assistant: “Tania, my love—I said—here my soul has come back to life, and she has opened herself towards you. Tania got up and ran towards me. The clear eyes of the girl reflected the ash-gray light of the stars. Above us the swan, his long neck extended in eternal flight, pierced the light clouds of the Milky Way.”<sup>62</sup> Here the radioactive rays are not portrayed as weapons of destruction bringing death, but quite the contrary, as a force that cleanses the soul. At the same time, the human mental states are depicted as a reflection of the “ash gray starlight” that already contains all options for action.<sup>63</sup>

A few years later Efremov formulated this cosmic influence of radioactive, cosmic rays on people even more clearly in his second scientific-fantastic novella, *The Starships* (*Zvezdnye korabli*, 1947).<sup>64</sup> Regarding Kazantsev's and

61 Ivan Efremov, “Observatoriia Nur-i-Desht. Iz tsikla rasskazov o neobyknovennom”, *Novyj mir* 11–12 (1944), 120–130, 130.

62 Ibid.

63 The fact that the swan constellation is well known to represent Zeus in ancient mythology, who seduces young women in this form, further underlines this “cosmic” semantics of the unusual love adventure in an exotic location. This “cosmic” semantics is formulated very explicitly by the narrator in a later version of the story: “Who knows, perhaps the influence of the radioactive substances on us will become even more understandable through further research successes. And who can guarantee that there aren't many other kinds of rays influencing us – whether it is the cosmic rays or not. Right there – I stood and lifted my hand to the starry sky – is perhaps the source of very different energies that send particles from distant star worlds from the black depths of space.” Ivan Efremov, “Observatoriia Nur-i-Desht,” *Bukhta raduzhnykh strui. Nauchno-fantasticheskie rasskazy* (Moscow, 1959), 55–83, 82–83.

64 The novella appeared in installments in the second half of 1947 in *Znanie – sila* before also being published as a book by *Detgiz* in 1948. This quote is taken from the magazine version,

Efremov's prose from those years, we can thus state that, using researcher characters that portrayed recognized and valued professors of Soviet society, they developed a vision of thoughts about the universe and models for explaining the world quite distant from the official science policy and ideological conflicts of the Soviet presence.<sup>65</sup> Without any regard for these conflicts, the topic of extraterrestrial visits to earth could continue to be dealt with in the popular scientific press. In 1950 the popular science journal *Znanie – sila* printed the sketch *From the Depth of the Universe* (*Iz glubiny vselennoi*) by Liapunov, who was quoted in the introduction to this article on the main topic, which confirmed the thesis of the Tunguska meteorite as a spaceship.<sup>66</sup> Half a year later, *Tekhnika – molodezhi* published another scientific fantastical story by Aleksandr Kazantsev, “The Guest from the Cosmos” (*Gost' iz kosmosa*), which is also dedicated to that thesis.<sup>67</sup> Detailed explanations on the possible life forms in the cosmos, the Mars Channels and possible human spaceflights accompanied this publication.<sup>68</sup>

Thus with the help of the “Tunguska Wonder” (*Tunguskoe divo*), within five years the topic of interplanetary travel and extraterrestrial, human-like intelligence had been made public in three main popular science journals. The response to these publications was considerable and led to a series of further texts on the topic of interplanetary spaceflights, rocket technology and intelligent life on other planets.<sup>69</sup> A Soviet critic later wrote that these texts drew the

see Ivan Efremov, “Zvezdnye korabli. Nauchno-fantasticheskaia povest”, *Znanie – sila* 7 (1947), 25–30; 8, 4 supplement, 29–36; 9, 30–35; 10, 28–32, 4 cover.

65 For the official notion of science see Ethan Pollock, *Stalin and the Soviet Science Wars* (Princeton, Oxford, 2007).

66 Boris Liapunov, *Iz glubiny Vselennoi*, *Znanie – sila* 10 (1950), 4–7.

67 A. Kazantsev, *Gost' iz Kosmosa*. Nauchno-fantasticheskii rasskaz, *Tekhnika – molodezhi* 3 (1951), 28–34.

68 Aside from the achievements of the astronomer and president of the Armenian Academy of Sciences, Viktor Ambartsumian (1908–1996), who founded the astrophysical observatory of Biurakan in 1946 and rose to prominence in 1947 with the discovery of the so-called “star associations,” it was above all the astronomer, co-founder of the Kazak Academy of the Sciences (1946) and popularizer of the self-created scientific discipline of “astrobotany,” Gavriil Tikhov (1875–1960), who was deemed to have advanced Soviet astronomy “incredibly far.” See A. Kazantsev et al., “Tunguskii meteorit. Est' li zhizn' na drugikh planetakh? Planeta Mars. Kanaly Marsa. Planeta Venera. Chto takoe astrobotanika? Kak mozno reshit' zagadku Tungusskogo meteorita?,” *Tekhnika – molodezhi* 3 (1951), 28–34. Gavriil Tikhov, *Noveishie issledovaniia po voprosu o rastitel'nosti na planete Mars* (Moscow, 1948).

69 E. Krinov, “Tunguskoe divo,” *Znanie – sila* 8 (1951), 12–14. One of the readers of these articles was the young Polish author Stanislaw Lem, who wrote his first great Science Fiction novel *The Astronauts* (*Astronauti*, 1951) based on the thesis of the Tunguska meteorite as an inter-

“attention of millions of readers”.<sup>70</sup> Reports about extraterrestrials were not only taken up with interest by a broad circle of readers, but were seriously discussed even among professional scientists.<sup>71</sup>

The “collective investigation” of the “guests from the cosmos” became so popular among an interested audience of laypeople, established scientists and members of the academy, that the Meteorite Commission of the Academy of Science of the USSR saw itself obliged to turn to the Secretariat of the Writers' Association of the USSR and request that it immediately curb the popularization of this topic as the association was spreading “fantastical ideas” “under the guise of scientifically proven assumptions”. This propaganda “of lies” had led to the fact that “the opinion had spread to wide circles among the population that Liapunov's guess was a proven scientific conclusion”. Alarmed by this development, the Executive Committee of the Academy of Sciences and the scientific department of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union intervened in the autumn of 1951 and banned any publications on the topic.<sup>72</sup>

If we look at these fictional and journalistic texts about extraterrestrial guests from outer space and damaged spaceships in a broader cultural historical context, they represent a strange phenomenon similar to the reports that began surfacing in the USA in 1947 about Unidentified Flying Objects, so-called UFOs, that allegedly came from space. While traumatic war experiences, fears about a world completely dominated by technology and circulating anti-communist conspiracy theories in the McCarthy era are possible reasons for the rise of these pop-culture narrations in the USA, similar arguments can be found for the Soviet Union under different conditions.<sup>73</sup> However, the abduction motif that was so dominant in the USA did not play a role during the late Stalin period, but Efremov's and Kazantsev's works accentuate the motif of an imaginary escape and the parallelization of nuclear energy as a demonic tran-

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planetary spaceship, which was the first German-Polish science fiction film ever released, in 1960, under the title *The Silent Star* (in the USA it ran in a substantially re-edited version under the title *First Spaceship on Venus*).

70 Thus, for example, for years lectures were given in the Moscow Planetarium on the “riddle” of the Tunguska meteorite. E.Brandis, “Puti razvitiia i problemy,” *O fantastike i priklucheniakh* (Leningrad, 1960), 48.

71 [Anon.], “Iz glubiny Vselennoi (Nauka i fantastika),” *Znanie – sila* 8 (1951), 11.

72 Krinov, “Tunguskoe divo,” 12–14; RGALI, f. 631, op. 3, ed. 210, l. 339–349.

73 Bryan Appleyard, *Aliens. Why they are here* (London 2007), 13–47; Roger Luckhurst, “The Science-Fictionalization of Trauma. Remarks on Narratives of Alien Abduction,” *Science Fiction Studies* 25 (1998), 29–52.

scendental force that, as “cosmic energy”, connects humans with the universe in thought.<sup>74</sup>

From a cultural politics perspective, the appearance of “guests from outer space” in the post-war period is even more surprising considering that this time of the so-called Zhdanovshchina was ideologically extremely repressive. The fact that the topic could nonetheless be published until 1951 points out how fragile the official ideological stance was, not only among writers, but especially among the intelligentsia in the field of technology and among scientists. When during the Thaw period the Tunguska meteorite became a steadfast element of worldwide UFO literature and of the engagement with so-called SETI phenomena as an “unsolved mystery”,<sup>75</sup> the story of its creation in the first post-war years had soon been completely forgotten.<sup>76</sup>

### From Sputnik to Stalker: “Philosophical fantasy” since the Thaw period

The launch of the first Sputnik satellite and the Soviet successes with manned spaceflights propelled the idea of an interplanetary spaceship onto the covers of the mainstream press. The search for extraterrestrial intelligence occupied an exceedingly large space in the popular scientific media of the time. Besides speculations about the true story behind the Tunguska Event, other topics surfaced in connection with “Guests from Outer Space”. For instance, the search for extraterrestrial influence on human history afforded a perfect opportunity to engage a wide variety of religious and folkloristic texts. The questions of how to communicate with such beings and whether they would look

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74 When looking at the broader reception of the topic, one can conclude that this “cosmic” subtext of the “Tunguska wonder” and of space travel played a decisive role not only in the works of Efremov and Kazantsev, but also in those by other authors.

75 F. Zigel, „Nerazgadannaia TAINA,” *Znanie – sila* 6 (1959), 40–41.

76 Matthias Schwartz, *Die Erfindung des Kosmos. Zur sowjetischen Science Fiction und populärwissenschaftlichen Publizistik vom Sputnikflug bis zum Ende der Tauwetterzeit* (Frankfurt a.M., 2003), 98–101. Only Vladimir Sorokin, who wrote a trilogy about the Tunguska phenomenon from 2002 to 2005, which, however, does not tell the story of extraterrestrial spaceships but of cosmic ice that provides enlightenment to a select group of people, adopts this connection of cosmic energy and spiritual enlightenment, as first conceived of by Kazantsev and Efremov, as the main idea of his cycle. Vladimir Sorokin, *Trilogiia*, (Moscow, 2005). Occultist interpretations and conspiracy theories around the “Tunguska phenomena” are popular in Russia to this day. See for instance Nikolai Vasil'ev, *Tunguskii Meteorit. Kosmicheskii fenomen 1980 g.* (Moscow, 2004); Anatolii Maksimov, *Nikola Tesla i zagadka Tunguskogo meteorita*, (Moscow, 2009). The abbreviation SETI stands for “Search for Extra-Terrestrial Intelligence”.



like human beings or totally different were discussed heatedly.<sup>77</sup> Striking in this debate was above all the wide variety of scientists from all disciplines who spoke out in support of the possibility of extraterrestrial contact. In 1965, the Armenian branch of the Academy of Sciences went so far as to organize an international conference on the matter.<sup>78</sup>

While the sciences provided arguments supporting the possibility of an encounter with extraterrestrial life forms, possible scenarios for the “First Contact” were played out in the SF of the Thaw period. Novels and stories that engaged with this topic were the most popular SF works of the period. Countless authors developed models to explain the world that diverged from Soviet ideology and that ranged from openly religious to clearly politically motivated, dissident visions.<sup>79</sup> Efremov and Kazantsev were two of the most prominent representatives of occult codings of space travel, Kazantsev argued for a historical revision of the history of the earth and the gods as a cosmic history of intelligent life, while Efremov tends to focus on a “cosmic holistic” revision of the Soviet image of humanity. Instead of a generic history—like Kazantsev—he writes texts about individual epiphanies.

Kazantsev not only remained the most prominent representative of the spaceship thesis of the Tunguska meteorite, which now appeared in almost all of his novels,<sup>80</sup> but also, similar to Erich von Däniken in Western Europe, in his texts he propagated the possibility that the human notions of the gods were actually stories about the visits of extraterrestrials to earth.<sup>81</sup> From the “cosmonauts of antiquity,”<sup>82</sup> he argued, one could see that mankind was descended

from a “solar race of intelligent beings” spread across the universe.<sup>83</sup> One example of this is the most prominent Soviet SF film of the Thaw period to have dealt with a cosmic journey, *The Planet of the Storms* (*Planeta bur'*), directed by Pavel Klushantsev in 1961, and based on a novel with the same title by Kazantsev. The film depicts a space mission to Venus in the near future, during which a Soviet scientist discusses with his American colleague the possibilities of an extraterrestrial visit beginning with the mystic Atlantis, before a young anthropologist continues his argumentation concluding: “The migration of life is as natural as seed swept by the wind on Earth. And branches of a single tribe of living beings are developing in the solar system. The solar tribe...”<sup>84</sup>

Ivan Efremov, on the other hand, became the one to help the breakthrough of Soviet SF in 1957 with his novel *The Andromeda Nebula* (*Tumannost' Andromedy*), which described a communist interplanetary utopia in the 34<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>85</sup> With this reference to a higher wisdom of the East and other older non-European cultures, Efremov in the end also followed a fashion that was generally spreading in Europe as a result of the 1960s movements, which also influenced the urban intelligentsia in the Soviet Union.<sup>86</sup> While this so called “philosophical fantasy”<sup>87</sup>, represented by authors such as Arkadii (1925c1991) and Boris Strugatskii (b.1933), Mikhail Emtsov (1930–2003) or Eremai Parnov (1935–2009), had been regarded by the political side with suspicion since the beginning of the Brezhnev period and was repeatedly limited by bans and censorship measures, it nonetheless continued to be published. Thus, for example, Emtsov and Parnov first wrote a series of SF stories together in which the

77 Zigel, “Nerazgadannaia TAINA,” 40–41; Iu. Rall, “Razumnye obitateli Vselennoi,” *Nauka i zhizn'*, 11 (1960), 32–34; A. Guliaev et al. (1960), “Zhizn' vokrug solntsa,” *Tekhnika – molodezhi*, 1 (1960), 36.

78 See Akademiia nauk Armianskoi SSR (ed.), *Vnezemnye tsivilizatsii. Trudy soveshchaniia. Biurakan, 20–23 maia 1964 g.* (Erevan, 1965).

79 Matthias Schwartz, “A Dream Come True. Close Encounters with Outer Space in Soviet Popular Scientific Journals of the 1950's and 60's,” In: Eva Maurer, Julia Richers, Monica Ruethers, Carmen Scheide, eds., *Soviet Space Culture – Cosmic Enthusiasm in Socialist Societies* (Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

80 In 1956 he also rewrote the novel *Pylaiushchii ostrov* in this regard, so that the spaceship landing of the Tunguska meteorite became the point of departure for the plot. This version of the novel was published in five editions until 1966, before Kazantsev rewrote the novel again.

81 Erich von Däniken, *Chariots of the Gods? Unsolved Mysteries of the Past* (1968) (New York, 1999).

82 The term of the “cosmonauts of antiquity” was first popularized by Kazantsev in 1961, when he advocated an until then unknown young author, before it became a widespread buzzword.

A. Kazantsev, “K stat'e M. Agresta ‘Kosmonavty drevnosti’, *Na sushe i na more. Povesti, rasskazy, ocherki*, vol. 2 (1961), 526–528; M. Agrest, “Kosmonavty drevnosti,” *ibid.*, 528–542.

83 A. Kazantsev, “Planeta bur'. Nauchno-fantasticheskaia povest',” *Gosti iz Kosmosa. Povesti i rasskazy* (Moscow, 1963), 469–608, here 596.

84 *Planeta bur'*, dir. Pavel Klushantsev, Leningradskaj kinostudiia nauchno-populiarnykh fil'mov 1961; Evgenii Kharitonov, “Kosmicheskaia odissea Pavla Klushantseva,” *Na ekrane – chudo. Otechestvennaia kinofantastika i kinoskazka (1909-2002). Materialy k populiarnoi enciklopedii*, Kharitonov and Andrei Shcherbak-Zhukov (Moscow, 2003).

85 I. Efremov, “Tumannost' Andromedy. Nauchno-fantasticheskii roman,” *Tekhnika – molodezhi*, 1 (1957) 26–31; 2, 25–29; 3, 22–27; 4, 22–27; 5, 22–27; 6, 27–32; 7, 28–33; 9, 30–35; 11, 4, 25–29.

86 See interviews of the author with Mikhail Emtsev (Moscow, 22.05.2003) and Eremai Parnov (Moscow, 18.09.2003). On occult and esoteric mysticism in Soviet SF of the time see Birgit Menzel, „Russian Science Fiction and Fantasy Literature,” *Reading for Entertainment in Contemporary Russia*, 117–150, here 132.

87 The term “filosovskaia fantastika” was first used in debates since 1962, Schwartz, *Die Erfindung des Kosmos*, 128–130.

heroes embark on quests for secret knowledge of spiritual insights of Native Americans of Latin America, such as *The last travel of colonel Fosset* (*Poslednoe puteshestvie polkovnika Fosseta*, 1964) or *The tear of the great waterfall* (*Sleza bolshogo vodopada*, 1969).<sup>88</sup> After their split in 1970, Emtsov turned towards dissident milieus and a private Christian-Buddhist search for God,<sup>89</sup> while Parnov became a successful foreign correspondent in Vietnam and India for *Pravda* and *Literaturnaia gazeta* and developed into an expert on all sorts of secret knowledge, mysticism, freemasonry and alternative religions, on which he published journalistic articles as well as fiction.<sup>90</sup> Yet, despite his emphasis on the battle against charlatans and superstition, which earned him influential positions in the Writers' Union and an award from the Interior Ministry, his works themselves are in certain ways influenced by Buddhist philosophy of cyclical world processes and a transcendental determination of fate.<sup>91</sup>

Also heavenly “guests from the cosmos” remained a central medium for religious salvation fantasies, of which Andrei Tarkovskii's film *Stalker* (1979), based on Arkadii and Boris Strugatskii's novel *The Roadside Picnic* (*Piknik na*

*obochine*, 1972), is probably the example most well known in the West.<sup>92</sup> As in the works of Efremov and Kazantsev, supposed secret relics from the cosmos are clearly associated with radioactive rays, which in Tarkovskii's work wield magical power over intellectuals from the capital city and promise the fulfillment of their secret wishes.

One can regard Tarkovskii's film as a symptomatic turn in the engagement with the topos “guests from outer space” as it marks the crossing over of the topic out of the niche of SF and of the engagement with occult topics, especially by the technological-scientific intelligentsia, into the broader mainstream of “serious” high culture. After this, religious and occult topics were to an ever lesser extent directly associated with the human cosmic journey into the universe and rather took on the older religious narrative model again, which had always located spiritual experiences, gods and angels in the heavens.<sup>93</sup> The human hubris, dominant in the works of Efremov and Kazantsev and generally in occult approaches, which posit that thanks to the “light of intellect” humans will themselves rise to possess “divine” wisdom, once again follows classic religious, mostly Christian Orthodox narrations.

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88 But also substances coming from space or produced in chemical laboratories and capable of inducing hallucinations repeatedly provide Emtsev's and Parnov's heroes insight into other states of being. Matthias Schwartz, „Diktatur als Drogentrip. Rauschfantasien in sowjetischer Science Fiction,“ *Rausch und Diktatur. Inszenierung, Mobilisierung und Kontrolle in totalitären Systemen*, eds. Árpád von Klimó, Malte Rolf (Frankfurt, New York, 2006), 255–280.

89 He published only one more novel in SF until 1990, *Bog posle shesti. Pritvoriashki* (*God after six. The Hypocrites*, 1976), in which he articulated his true belief in God against false rituals and manipulations using the case of a sect. In his legacy there is a series of texts in which he articulated his views on spirituality and religion. M. Emtsev, *Dusha mira. Izbrannoe* (Moscow, 2004).

90 His most famous trilogy of detective fiction about inspector Liusin dealt with the ban on the Knights Templar in the 14<sup>th</sup> century and how the persecuted friars remained secretly active until nowadays (*Larets Marii Medichi, The wreath of Mary Medici*, 1972); it re-evaluated Hindu and alchemist knowledge of the middle ages (*Tretii glaz Shivy, The third eye of Shiva*, 1975) and dealt with ancient experiments in the search of a mysterious “elixir of immortality” *The Maltese baton* (*Mal'tisiskii zhezl*, 1987).

91 Beginning with his book *At the crossroad of eternity* (*Na prerekrestke beskonechnosti*, 1967) Parnov started to write educative documentary books with fictional elements on occult and religious themes. The most controversial and popular one was his bestseller *The Throne of Lucifer. Critical views on magic and occultism* (*Tron Liutsifera*, 1985), followed by a series of books on similar topics like *Rulers and mages* (*Vlastiteli i magi*, 2 vol., 1996), *The secret signs of Gods* (*Tainye pis'mena bogov*, 2007) or *Satanic deals. Secrets of the Second Worldwar* (*Sataninskie sdelki. Tainy Vtoroi mirovoi voyny*, 2009).

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92 While Arkadii and Boris Strugatskii engaged with religious themes and apocalyptic scenarios starting with their novels *It is Hard to be a God* and *Monday begins on Saturday*, they always remained within the scope of materialistic, humanistic explanations of the world, whereas Tarkovskii in his films dealt with religious belief systems. See Yvonne Howell, *Apocalyptic Realism. The Science Fiction of Arkady and Boris Strugatsky*. (New York, 1994); Daniel Kluger, “Fables of Desire,” *Science Fiction Studies* 31 (2004), 415–417.

93 See Nadya Peterson, *Subversive Imaginations. Fantastic Prose and the End of Soviet Literature, 1970s–1990s* (Boulder, Colorado, 1997).



## Conclusion

If we try to summarize the occult aspects of Soviet SF since its emergence at the peak of the so-called Great Terror in the midst of the Stalinist scientific intelligentsia, we can highlight some common elements. First of all, all texts about some sort of secret or hence unknown knowledge offer a technical and scientific explanation that serves as a medium of contact for extraterrestrial experiences. These encounters take place, for the most part, in the Soviet present or in the near future and are, in this way, accessible and comprehensible for readers based on their everyday experiences. At the same time, these cosmic contacts are never described in literature as collective encounters, but rather as experiences of individuals or small groups, which remain outside of the public sphere and are not institutionalized. Instead, they are reduced to the level of singular, personal experiences. These fictional contacts with “secret” extraterrestrial entities offered not only new insights into the nature of humanity, but also challenged materialistic explanatory models of human history and society. In this sense, “guests from outer space” are not presented as a classical instrument of exoneration, confession or projection, but often allow the formulation of secret or forbidden desires that can be interpreted as a fictional realization of occult practices or belief systems.<sup>94</sup>

In the context of the Cold War period, the personalized “guests from outer space” were, at the same time, aimed against the popular myths of the West: The extraterrestrials were conceived as friends and not as hostile invaders, not as colonizers intending to remain on the earth, but rather as temporary visitors, who possibly had a positive influence on human history and always signaled hope for the future.<sup>95</sup> Naturally, comparable phenomena can also be observed on the other side of the “iron curtain”. The wave of UFO hysteria that gripped America in the post-war period is one prominent example. Furthermore, the enthusiasm for cosmic issues by the hippie movement or the fascination with outer space by African-Americans since the 1950s represent similar popular fashions.<sup>96</sup> However, whereas para-science and “astrofuturism” were

94 It can be assumed that this fictionalization of occult knowledge was, at least to some extent, the result of targeted cultural policymaking. It offered alternative models for the creation of meaning, which satisfied certain religious needs while following the party line set by the Soviet regime regarding technical and scientific issues. At the same time this phenomenon worked distinctly against the Russian Orthodox belief system.

95 On this difference, see Menzel, “Russian Science Fiction and Fantasy Literature,” 135–136.

96 De Witt Douglas Kilgore, *Astrofuturism. Science, Race, and Visions of Utopia in Space* (Philadelphia PA, 2003); Marina Benjamim, *Rocket Dreams. How the Space Age Shaped Our Vision*

pushed to the margins of societal discourse in the West, this division was not present in the Soviet Union: science was the legitimating principle of society. In this way, occult and fantastic theses could be supported by prominent experts in the central institutions of society.

In summary, the following can be noted about cosmic themes, as they were present in Soviet SF since the middle of the 1930s: The project of enlightenment, which was intended to give common knowledge and universal truth to the people to get rid of false gods and to organize society according to strictly secular criteria, was fundamentally challenged with the establishment of Stalin’s dictatorship. This challenge enabled the emergence of occult notions of natural sciences, which aimed at a qualitative, dialectical leap of knowledge. SF texts offered fictional settings that would ultimately change our previous worldview. As early as the prewar era, SF drew “forbidden” connections between secret scientific and technical innovations, cosmic occurrences and possible contacts with extraterrestrial beings. This disposition of “guests from outer space” was to become a central topic of popular scientific and “scientific fantastic” literature in the postwar period, which, as I have argued in this article, can be characterized as a specifically Soviet occult discourse.

In considering the longer-term cultural-historical consequences of Soviet SF for the post-Soviet occult revival, one has to take into consideration the following two aspects. On the one hand, as the print media and television began during the Glasnost period to report on topics that had long been subject to tight censorship, the public was above all fascinated by stories about parapsychology and the New Age. This media success of occult and new-religious movements in post-Soviet Russia can be only partially explained as a simple adaptation of western entertainment culture and zeitgeist trends.<sup>97</sup> To a greater extent, these movements can be traced back to a deeply seated occult interest: namely, the decades-long engagement with this topic in Soviet SF texts and popular scientific journals.<sup>98</sup>

On the other hand, the continuity of religious and occult discourses certainly also had an important impact on post-Soviet fantasy literature, which is even today, along with crime fiction, the most popular genre of “light” fiction.<sup>99</sup>

*of a World Beyond* (New York, 2003); Mark Bould, “The Ship Landed Long Ago. Afrofuturism and Black SF,” *Science Fiction Studies* 34 (2007), 177–186.

97 See Birgit Menzel, “The Occult Revival in Russia Today and Its Impact on Literature,” *The Harriman Review* 16 (2007), 1–14.

98 Which again took its origins in the Silver Age of Fin-de-Siècle Russia, cf. Rosenthal, “Introduction,” In: *The Occult in Russian and Soviet Culture*. 1–32.

99 Menzel, „Russian Science Fiction and Fantasy Literature,” 118.

In asking why this type of literature is so successful one answer is that, possibly, the function of fantastic devices nowadays has changed significantly. Whereas Soviet “scientific fantasy” can be partly interpreted as a movement seeking to promote forbidden religious or occult ideas and aiming against the official ideology of an atheist society, in post-Soviet fantasy these alternative worlds no longer claim the authority of the sciences, but proceed in another direction: Post-Soviet fantasy, claims the multifaceted authority of spiritual and folkloristic interpretive models in order to cope by literary means with the idiosyncrasies of Putin’s and Medvedev’s Russia in a globalized world. The fantastic description and occult explanation of the Soviet past and Russian present, as it dominates many texts of so-called “alternative histories” or “crypto histories”, continue explanatory models developed in Soviet SF.<sup>100</sup> At the same time, these stories present an attractive alternative to new political ideologies as well as to Russian Orthodoxy by devising an entire collection of extraterrestrial and mythic beings and phenomena for all circumstances. Hence they offer imaginary worlds that promote all sorts of esoteric thinking, conspiracy theories or para-scientific knowledge, but in their playful hybrid assemblage of these discourses, similar to the “communist Pinkertons” of the 1920s, simultaneously vulgarize and defuse them. Post-soviet fantasy thus often constitutes a counter-discourse to the actual occult revival in Russia rather than enforcing it.

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100 Vitalii Kaplan, “A Look Behind the Wall. A Topography of Contemporary Russian Science Fiction,” *Russian Social Science Review* 2 (2003), 82–104; Elena Kovtun et al., eds., *Russkaia fantastika na prekras’ne epochi I kul’tur. Materialy Mezhdunarodnoy nauchnoy konferentsii 21–23 marta 2006 goda* (Moscow, 2007); Matthias Schwartz, „Postimperiale Erinnerungsbilder. Zum Umgang mit der Geschichte in der russischen Populärkultur,“ In: *Geschichtspolitik und Erinnerungskultur im neuen Russland*, eds. Lars Karl, Igor J. Polianski (Göttingen, 2009), 215–234.